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ABSTRACT

This brief report summarizes a longer document with the same title. The report discusses the problem of sexual harassment on college campuses and what intervention strategies academic institutions can take to help eliminate the problem. It notes that sexual harassment is a form of sexual discrimination prohibited by federal law, and examines what the definition of sexual harassment is as well as why it is illegal. Research shows that between 20 and 30 percent of undergraduate female students are victims of some form of sexual harassment by at least one of their professors during their undergraduate years. Additionally, 60 percent of presidents of large research and doctorate institutions believed sexual harassment to be a problem. The most important steps institutions can take to eliminate sexual harassment are to: (1) carefully draft definitions of sexual harassment, (2) provide accessible grievance procedures, and (3) provide education about the nature of this type of behavior to educate the campus community. (Contains 10 references.) (GLR)

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Colleges and universities are expected to provide learning and working environments wherein all members of academic communities may pursue their studies, scholarship and work without bias or intimidation. The specter of sexual harassment is inimical to this end.

Since the impact and scope of the sexual harassment problem on college campuses first were recognized during the early 1980s, an enormous amount of attention has been focused on the problem. Campuses have developed policies, procedures, extensive training programs, and materials that seek to identify and prevent sexual harassment and promoted conferences and symposia addressing the problem. Yet, in spite of these substantial initiatives and perhaps as a result of heightened awareness of sexual harassment as a problem (or perhaps more people alleging harassment), the frequency of complaints on college and university campuses has increased.

What Is the Definition of Sexual Harassment and Why Is It Illegal?

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

Sexual harassment is a form of sexual discrimination and is prohibited by federal laws. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972 are the federal statutes under which are brought the majority of sexual harassment complaints against higher education institutions and their employees. The Civil Rights Act of 1991 provides additional rights and remedies to sexual harassment complainants.

What Kinds of Behavior Constitute Sexual Harassment?

Sexually harassing behaviors encompass a broad range of actions, including unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favors when the acceptance or rejection of such actions serves as a basis for academic or employment decisions. Sexual harassment behavior also includes conduct that interferes with a student's or employee's performance by allowing the existence of a hostile working or learning environment.

More specifically, sexually harassing behavior includes the following: (1) gender harassment, including sexist statements and behavior that convey insulting, degrading, or sexist attitudes; (2) seductive behavior encompassing unwanted, inappropriate, and offensive physical or verbal sexual advances; (3) sexual bribery, involving solicitation of sexual activity or other sex-linked behavior by promise of reward; (4) sexual coercion of sexual activity or other sex-linked behavior by threat of punishment; and (5) sexual assault, attempted rape, and rape (Fitzgerald et al. 1988).

How Often Does Sexual Harassment Occur on Campuses, and Who Are the Victims?

While all members of the academic community are potential victims of unwelcome sexual behavior, the majority of complainants are female students, faculty, and staff. Dziech and Weiner report that 20 to 30 percent of undergraduate female students are the victims of some form of sexual harassment by at least one of their professors during their undergraduate years (1984), and Ernest Boyer reported that more than 60 percent of the presidents surveyed at large research and doctorate institutions said sexual harassment is a problem (1990).

When the definition of harassment is expanded to include sexist remarks and other forms of gender harassment, the incidence rate among undergraduate women exceeds 75 percent. Fitzgerald et al. reported approximately 50 percent of women at one university and nearly 76 percent at another university indicated that they had experienced some form of harassing behavior during their careers (1988). Paludi and Barickman suggest that, because of power structures and cultural biases within the academy, women are overwhelmingly the targets of sexual harassment and, although a profile has not been empirically established, nearly all harassers are male (1991c).

What Steps Should Institutions Take to Eliminate Sexual Harassment from the Academy?

Members of institutional boards of governance and college and university administrators must provide strong support of programs to eliminate sexual harassment if this blight is to be removed from the academy. Among the most important steps that institutional leaders must take to this end are: (1) carefully drafted definitions of what constitutes sexual harassment and clear policies that prohibit such actions; (2) accessible grievance procedures that are communicated to and understood by all members of the academic community; and (3) ongoing efforts to educate the campus community about the nature of sexual harassment and its destructive impact within the community. Taken together, these three steps represent the best practice that institutions have experienced after more than a decade of aggressive response to the problem.

From Conflict to Community

The nation's colleges and universities occupy roles in our culture that impose unique expectations and opportunities. They are obligated to serve as moral exemplars by embracing diversity and inclusiveness while providing an environment free of debilitating harassment. They must lead by example in eliminating gender inequities among all segments of the academic community. They have also the important opportunity to shape the future by forging an ethos of enfranchisement, equity, and care. In no other institution in American society are these expectations and opportunities more clearly focused than in institutions of higher education.

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